

AN EARLY ENTOMOLOGICAL BOOK FOR CHILDREN

BY HARRY B. WEISS

In 1819 there was published in London a work of 408 pages entitled "Dialogues on Entomology, in which the Forms And Habits of Insects are Familiarly Explained." This was illustrated with twenty-five engraved plates and printed by Charles Wood of Poppin's Court, Fleet Street, for R. Hunter, "Successor to Mr. Johnson, No. 72, St. Paul's Churchyard." There is no indication either on the title page or within the pages, of its author. Thirty-seven years after its publication, a Robert Hunter of Edinburgh was the author of a note in the *Zoologist* (14, 1856, p. 5214) on the "Singular effect of fascination on a fly," in which there is described the supposed fascination which a scorpion exerted upon a muscid fly in Central India, but there is nothing to indicate that this Robert Hunter was the same one who published the "Dialogues."

Joseph Johnson, the predecessor of R. Hunter, was one of the leading publishers of London. He brought out the writings of Priestly, John Newton, was friendly with Erasmus Darwin and published his work, and was highly thought of by William Cowper, who found him fair and judicious until their relations became less cordial as a result of a financial disagreement over a translation of Homer, which Cowper issued by subscription. However, Johnson had a reputation for honesty and integrity and his views were advanced. At one time he was in prison for nine months for publishing prohibited works of Gilbert Wakefield. He was associated with William Blake and brought out Blake's work on "The French Revolution." To John Henry Fuseli's "Milton Gallery," he was a generous subscriber. Fuseli, a painter, was interested in entomology, and one of his brothers, Caspar, wrote upon entomological subjects, to the extent of twenty-five titles.

In the preface to the "Dialogues," which was supposed to be for children around eight or ten years of age, the idea is ex-

pressed of the need for keeping infant minds constantly employed and guided. Natural history, including the study of entomology, was supposed to be well suited for this purpose, being easily kept down to the capacity of any age, and presenting interesting facts for amusing the senses without putting an undue strain upon the mind.

With this purpose in mind the unknown author wrote the "Dialogues" because of the absence of popular works on the subject and because he believed that it was possible to blend technical language with interesting descriptions in a way that would not discourage young readers. He pays a tribute to Kirby and Spence's "Introduction," but thought it was beyond the comprehension of little students.

The book is dedicated, "with sentiments of esteem, gratitude, and affection to 'Miss Edgeworth,' from whose writings the youth of the present age have derived equal entertainment and advantage." To students of children's literature the name of Maria Edgeworth is well known. In fact, it is well known beyond the realm of children's literature, as Miss Edgeworth had a long career as an author of novels and books of instruction. Her children's books contained no fairies, and her delicately didactic stories always had a moral. However, she was "the novelist of the nursery," and her characters were natural children and not abstractions. If the morals of her tales are forgotten, many of her accounts will be found to be good stories told in simple language, and in a natural manner.

The author of the "Dialogues on Entomology," who admired Miss Edgeworth and who imitated her method of instruction, apparently had a good knowledge of the entomology of the period, acquired from contemporary entomological literature or by study and personal observations, and perhaps by both. The book commences with some general statements about moths, caterpillars, insect eggs, transformations, etc., and finally goes into classification and the various orders of insects, with numerous interpolations referring to the habits, food plants, etc., of particular species, explanations of scientific names, little disquisitions about human nature, etc., ending with accounts of spiders and crabs, and of course, with a final statement about divine

Providence attending to the preservation of all his creatures, "even the most insignificant insect," and to the object of natural history in leading the mind from the works of God to God himself.

The dialogue method of imparting instruction is no longer popular, and in the past even entomology did not entirely escape the attention of the "question and answer" school of educators. In the book under discussion the information is imparted to the reader by means of forty-five conversations or dialogues between a little girl named Lucy and her highly informed mother. At this time some of these dialogues seem mildly amusing. Lucy asks most of the questions and her mother answers them. Samples of the dialogues are appended.

Page 26. *Lucy*: Do many sorts of caterpillars live in this way under the bark?

Mother: Several of our most beautiful and largest species.

Now, my love, I have promised your sister Fanny to answer her botanical questions; so we must defer the rest of the caterpillar history till tomorrow.

Lucy: Very well, mama; you have been very good to stay so long with me. I will now go and weed my nice bed of mignonette.

Page 129. *Lucy*: What a monstrous earwig there is under the crystal! I see, indeed, that it has a short elytra.

Mother: Try to describe it.

Lucy: Antennae, taper; elytra, short. Will you lend me your magnifying glass, that I may look at the feet?—Oh! I distinctly see three little joints in each foot. In the antennae, I think I can reckon fourteen joints; how very delicate they are. In the last place, the tail is forked.

Page 162. *Lucy*: Bugs are odious creatures; I am sure very little that is entertaining can be said of them; but so I thought of earwigs, and yet I was delighted with their history. Good-bye, mamma, I now go and dig up my bulbous roots.

Mother: Farewell, Lucy, I wish you success.

Page 215. *Lucy*: But mamma, only think of my cousin Louisa's saying last night that she thought all the accounts of insects must be fudge.

Mother: Your cousin Louisa is clever, and has read a great deal, for a girl of fourteen; but in such a desultory manner, that she has reaped but little advantage from what she has learned. Superficial knowledge usually produces vanity and self-sufficiency. . . . I have no doubt, that, as she grows older, she will cure herself of these defects.

Page 348. *Mother:* Today we shall proceed to the seventh and last order of insects; it comprehends all those that have no wings at any period of their lives; and as this is the distinguishing characteristic of the order, it is therefore called aptera, that is, without wings.

Lucy: But, mamma, in some of the other orders there are female insects which have no wings, the glow-worm, for instance.

Mother: True, Lucy; but no apterous insects, whether male or female, have wings; nor, with the exception of the flea, do they go through the transformations, which those in the other orders invariably observe. They are born in their complete shape, and only change their skins as they increase in size. There are several genera in this order, of which very little is known: I shall begin with a family, which, though always mentioned with well founded disgust, is, notwithstanding, deserving of some attention.

Lucy: I cannot imagine what creature you mean.

Mother: Indeed, it is most probably that my well combed and cleanly little girl never saw, much less felt, one of these odious little animals—I mean the *pediculus*, or louse, the scourge of filth and indolence.

Lucy: I have heard people mention a louse, but I never saw one.

Then mother tells Lucy how the common louse multiplies at a prodigious rate and how it sucks blood, but the dialogues soon discontinue such a “disgusting subject,” and Lucy and her mother proceed to the flea.

Twenty-five engravings illustrate the “Dialogues on Entomology,” but the insect drawings are stiff and formal. In some copies they have been hand colored.

I fear that very few Lucys grew up to be entomologists after having been fed on these “Dialogues.”